The University of Chicago

THE PUBLICATION AND RECEPTION OF *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* IN AMERICA

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE
1938

By

ARTHUR L. VOGELBACK

Private Edition, Distributed by
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THE PUBLICATION AND RECEPTION OF *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* IN AMERICA

ARTHUR LAWRENCE VOGELBACK
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THE UNUSUAL details attending the publication and reception of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are not commonly known, and the American critical reaction to the book illuminates the standards of its time.

I

Of all Clemens's books published up to 1885, *Huckleberry Finn* received the greatest pre- and post-publication notice. While the author possessed a shrewd sense of publicity and was rarely without his own devices for securing attention, in this case most of the advertisement was apparently unsought. As early as February, 1884, the *Dial* announced: "Mark Twain's new book will bear the title 'Huckleberry Finn, A Sequel to Tom Sawyer.' "[1] Yet almost a year later the book was still in the announcement stage.[2] One newspaper, in the autumn of 1884, thus explained the delay:

> "Huckleberry Finn," Mark Twain's new book, was completed last March, but owing to complications and differences with his publishers, it has not yet appeared. When the book was finished last month, Mark Twain made a proposition in regard to its publication to the American Publishing Company of this city [Hartford] which published his "Innocents Abroad" and his later works. From then on the company, which hitherto had been but a small concern, achieved a reputation and standing equal to any of the older, established publishing houses of the country. Mark Twain, on his side, obtained royalties amounting in all to over $400,000. When "Huckleberry Finn," the sequel to "Tom Sawyer" was completed, Twain again made a proposition to his publishers to produce this new work. Negotiations were commenced, but never completed. The parties could not agree on terms. Evidently Mark Twain considered that he had built up the American Publishing Company, while they seemed to think themselves the founders of his fame and fortune. Liberal royalties were offered Twain by the publishing company, but he refused to accept them. The final offer was that the profits should be divided, each of the parties to receive 50 per cent of the pro-

[1] *Dial*, IV, 261 (Feb., 1884). [2] *Critic*, VI, 35 (Jan. 17, 1885).

ceeds from the sale of the new work. This proposition was not satisfactory to the author who wanted 60 per cent of the profits. This offer the company refused to accept, and he determined on entering a new business—combining that of the publisher with the author.

Mark Twain had a nephew residing in New York in whose business ability he had great confidence. This man, whose name is Charles L. Webster, is engaged in the book-publishing business. . . . [Twain] entered into a partnership with his nephew to produce his new work. . . .[3]

In the long time between the initial notice and the final date of publication,[4] the book received extensive publicity. Portions were printed in the *Century;*[5] the author, on his tour with G. W. Cable, read extracts from it;[6] prospectuses of the story were sent out,[7] and at least two newspapers, the *New York Tribune*[8] and the *Chicago Times*[9] printed generous selections.

One incident, in the autumn of 1884, was particularly instrumen-

[3] *New York World,* Nov. 27, 1884, p. 1. A. B. Paine, however, states that "already, in the spring of 1884, Webster had the new Mark Twain book . . . well in hand" (*Mark Twain: A Biography,* New York, 1912, II, 771). It appears also, from a letter Mark Twain wrote to Webster early in the canvassing campaign, that he was determined to postpone publication until forty thousand subscriptions had been secured (*ibid.,* II, 773).

[4] *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was officially published in America in Dec., 1884, but was not ready for actual delivery until Feb., 1885 (*ibid.,* II, 793).

[5] "An Adventure of Huckleberry Finn: With an account of the Famous Grangerford-Shepherdson Feud," *Century,* XXIX, 268-278 (Dec., 1884); "Jim's Investments, and King Sollermun," *Century,* XXIX, 456-458 (Jan., 1885); "Royalty on the Mississippi," *Century,* XXIX, 544-567 (Feb., 1885).

[6] For example, in the lecture at Keokuk, Iowa (Jan. 15, 1885), it was reported in the *Keokuk Gate City* that "Mark . . . delighted his audience with his amusing description of the discussion between the darkey Jim, and Huck Finn, on the relative merits and demerits of 'King Sollermun' "; and the *Davenport Gazette,* reporting Twain's lecture, remarked that Twain read first from *Huckleberry Finn* and delighted his audience immensely (Feb. 1, 1885). Commenting on this, Mr. Fred W. Lorch [from whose article "Mark Twain in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics,* XXVII, 523 and 533 (Oct., 1929), respectively—these items are secured] says: "It would be difficult to say which of Twain's reading gave the most pleasure . . . *Huckleberry Finn* received the most newspaper space."

The *Boston Transcript* (Nov. 14, 1884, p. 1) thus reported a reading by Clemens and Cable in that city: "Mr. Cable . . . read selections from his novel, Dr. Sevier . . . Mr. Clemens . . . read selections from his new book, now in press, in which 'Huckleberry Finn' again figures. . . ."

[7] Stated by the *New York World,* Nov. 27, 1884, p. 1.

[8] *New York Tribune,* Jan. 11, 1885, p. 9. Two full columns were headed: "Mark Twain—Shakespeare and Murder on the Mississippi—A Sketch from Twain's Unpublished Book, 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'—A Wandering Show—A Tragedy of the Street."

[9] *Chicago Times,* Jan. 11, 1885. Captioned: "Two Tramps—A Sketch from an Unpublished Book entitled: 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.' " (This reference is supplied me through the courtesy of Mr. George H. Brownell of Chicago.)

tal in focusing public notice on the book. It dealt with an improper alteration made by some unknown in one of the pictures. The amount of newspaper attention accorded this event was surprising. The most complete account was in the *New York World,* which headed its article: "Mark Twain in a Dilema [*sic*]—A Victim of a Joke He Thinks The Most Unkindest Cut of All." The essential part of the story was as follows:

. . . In order to properly embellish the book, the services of a leading metropolitan engraver were secured, and from this comes all the trouble into which Hartford's popular author is now plunged. The engravings, after having been cut on the plates, were sent to the electrotyper. One of the plates represented a man with a downcast head, standing in the foreground of a particularly striking illustration. In front of him was a ragged urchin with a look of dismay overspreading his countenance. In the background, and standing behind the boy, was an attractive-looking young girl, whose face was enlivened with a broad grin. Something which the boy or man had said or done evidently amused her highly. The title of the cut was, "In a Dilema; What Shall I Do?"

When the plate was sent to the electrotyper, a wicked spirit must have possessed him. The title was suggestive. A mere stroke of the awl would suffice to give the cut an indecent character never intended by the author or engraver. It would make no difference in the surface of the plate that would be visible to the naked eye, but when printed would add to the engraving a characteristic which would be repudiated not only by the author, but by all the respectable people of the country into whose hands the volume should fall. The work of the engraver was successful. It passed the eye of the inspector and was approved. A proof was taken and submitted. If the alteration of the plate was manifested in the proof it was evidently attributed to a defect in the press and paper, which would be remedied when the volume was sent to the press. Now the work was ready for printing.

In issuing books to be sold by "subscription only" the publishers first strike off a large number of prospectuses, which are to be used by the agents when soliciting subscribers to the work. Some 3,000 of these prospectuses, with the defective cut, were presented and distributed to the different agents throughout the country. The entire work had passed the eyes of the various readers and inspectors, and the glaring indecency of the cut had not been discovered. Throughout the country were hundreds of agents displaying the merits of the work and elaborating on the artistic work of the engravings. It was remarkable that, while the defects were so palpable, none of the other agents noticed it, or if

he did so, he failed to report it to the publishers. Possibly they might have considered the alteration intentional, as the title to the illustration was now doubly suggestive.

At last a letter came from the Chicago agent calling attention to the cut. Then there was consternation in the offices of the publishers. Copies of the prospectus were hauled from the shelf and critically examined. Then for the first time it dawned on the publishers that such an illustration would condemn the work. Immediately all the papers were telegraphed to, and the prospectuses called in. The page containing the cut was torn from the book, a new and perfect illustration being substituted. Agents were supplied with the improved volumes and are now happy in canvassing for a work to which there can be no objection, while they smile at the prospects of heavy commissions. But the story leaked out. Several opposition publishers got hold of copies of the cut, however, and these now adorn their respective offices.[10]

II

Huckleberry Finn seemed destined for trouble from the beginning. A short time after the incident of the tampered engraving, Mark Twain brought suit against the Boston publishing firm of Estes and Lauriat for selling the book at a lower price than that offered by the canvassers. The lawsuit was decided in favor of the defendants, and the main points of the case were thus summarized in the *Boston Advertiser:*

Estes and Lauriat are a firm of booksellers and publishers located in Boston. In their last holiday catalog appeared an advertisement in which a new work, entitled *Huckleberry Finn,* written by the plaintiff under the

[10] *New York World,* Nov. 27, 1884, p. 1. The account was copied by the *Chicago Tribune,* Nov. 30, 1884, p. 23, and was reported also in the *New York Tribune,* Nov. 29, 1884, p. 3; and in the *Boston Transcript* Dec. 2, 1884, p. 6. There were some variations in the accounts. For example, the *New York Tribune* reported that Charles L. Webster, while in San Francisco, had his attention called to the improper cut, and telegraphed at once to New York to stop publication. Merle Johnson, in *A Bibliography of Mark Twain* (New York, 1935, p. 48), remarks that thus far no copy of the book has appeared with the damaged plate (known as p. 283). Apparently, too, the cut has never been found. The matter is mysterious, and remembering Twain's talents as a self-publicity agent, it would not be surprising if he engineered the whole thing as an advertising stunt. Mr. Franklin J. Meine, however, tells me that he has strong reasons for believing that there was no hoax in the matter, and that the incident actually happened as reported in the newspapers.

The following articles deal with this problem of the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn:* Irving S. Underhill, "An Inquiry Into Huckleberry Finn," *Colophon,* Pt. VI, o.s., 1-10 (1931); Irving S. Underhill, "The Haunted Book: Concerning Huckleberry Finn," *Colophon,* I, o.s., 281-292 (Autumn, 1935); Irving S. Underhill, "Two Interesting Letters Pertaining to 'Huckleberry Finn,'" *American Book Collector,* II, 282-289 (Nov., 1932); and Irving S. Underhill, "'Tempest in a Teapot' or 'Notes on Huckleberry Finn,'" *American Book Collector,* IV, 153-156 (Sept.-Oct., 1933).

name Mark Twain, was offered for sale at a price reduced from $2.75 to $2.25. The book is sold on what is known as the subscription plan, and the regular subscription price is $2.75. The canvass for the book has been in progress for some months. The advertisement to sell the work for less than the subscription price is working great injury to the regular sales by subscription. The book is not yet published, and will not be before February. On December 3, 1884, the title of the work was deposited with the librarian of Congress to secure a copyright. Charles L. Webster and Co., of New York are the general managers and authorized agents of the plaintiff in the publication and sale of the book. Numerous canvassing agents are appointed in different parts of the country. These agents purchase the books, but bind themselves by contract to sell only to subscribers, and not to the trade, and for the full retail price. Dummies of the book were left for examination. Two of the persons who had called had previously sold Estes and Lauriat other works of the same author. Estes and Lauriat contracted with these persons to take one hundred or more copies of the book, and then inserted in their holiday catalogue about to be published, the advertisement referred to. Up to this time, about thirty orders for the book have been received by them. They had no knowledge of the terms of contract between the plaintiff, or his publishers and their canvassing agents. They say the prior works of the author published by subscription have been freely offered to them at large discounts. As soon as suit was brought, they cut out the page from the catalogue containing the advertisement, and they have not since, and do not propose to distribute any more catalogues containing the advertisement.[11]

The chief event, however, that put *Huckleberry Finn* into the news was its exclusion by the Concord, Massachusetts, Library Committee, on the ground that the book exerted a dangerous moral influence on the young. Newspapers and magazines joined in commenting on the incident, and the book became a *cause célèbre* overnight, with vast advantage to its sales. As the *New*

[11] Quoted by the *Literary World*, XVI, 66 (Feb. 21, 1885). The official court report of the suit was printed in the *Boston Transcript*, Feb. 10, 1885, p. 4. With reference to the prices of *Huckleberry Finn*, it is interesting to read some of the advertisements, and note the dip in price of the book within a few months. The Chicago Brentano's store advertised the book on Feb. 28, 1885, in the *Chicago Tribune* (p. 12) for $3.00; on March 14, 1885, in the same newspaper (p. 9) the Jansen, McClurg Co. of Chicago printed a price list of "Recent Novels of Note." These were: *Ramona*—$1.25; *Money-Makers*—$1.00; *Bread Winners*—$1.00; *The Shadow of the War*—$1.25; *The Mystery of the Locks*—$1.50; *Huckleberry Finn*—$2.75. Then in May (in the *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1885, p. 9) Chas. Gossage & Co. advertised *Huckleberry Finn* for only $1.95, and quoted its "companion volume," *Tom Sawyer*, at $1.75. It was this sort of price-cutting that the subscription book companies feared, and that Twain was fighting in his suit.

York Tribune expressed it: "The action of the Massachusetts Library in rejecting Mark Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' will prove an excellent advertisement for the book."[12] Boston publications like the *Transcript,*[13] and the *Literary World,*[14] praised the Committee for suppressing the work; the *Chicago Tribune* took Clemens's side of the argument, and thus interpreted the incident: "Mark Twain's real offense which prompted the Concordians to boot his latest book out of their library was once making fun of Emerson, and it is alleged that he has even spoken disrespectfully of Whittier."[15] Clemens, himself, judging the episode purely in terms of advertisement, enjoyed the hullabaloo attending the morals charge. The *Tribune* in Chicago reported: "Mark Twain thanks the Concord (Mass.) Library Committee for helping the sale of *Huckleberry Finn* by 'praising it with faint damns' ";[16] and, in a letter to Charles L. Webster, Clemens wrote:

> The Committee of the Public Library of Concord, Mass., have given us a rattling tip-top puff which will go into every paper in the country. They have expelled Huck from their library as "trash and suitable only for the slums." That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure.[17]

The *Boston Advertiser* reprimanded Mark Twain for his flippant attitude, and called his new book a failure. "We say failed," it reiterated, "for we are unwilling to believe that his impudent intimation that a larger sale and larger profits are a satisfactory recompense to him for the unfavorable judgment of honest critics, is a true indication of the standard by which he measures success in literature."[18]

An amusing conclusion to this Concord episode was Clemens's election shortly thereafter as honorary member of the Concord Free-Trade Club. He lost no time in writing a sarcastic acknowledgement, which was printed in newspapers and magazines.[19]

[12] *New York Tribune,* March 22, 1885, p. 2.

[13] *Boston Transcript,* March 19, 1885, p. 4.

[14] *Literary World,* XVI, 106 (March 21, 1885).

[15] *Chicago Tribune,* March 22, 1885, p. 5. [16] *Ibid.,* April 9, 1885, p. 4.

[17] Albert Bigelow Paine (ed.), *Mark Twain's Letters* (New York, 1917), II, 452-453.

[18] Quoted from the *Boston Advertiser* by the *Boston Transcript,* April 4, 1885, p. 7.

[19] Said Clemens: "It does look as if Massachusetts were in a fair way to embarrass me with kindnesses this year. In the first place, a Massachusetts judge had just decided in open court that a Boston publisher may sell, not only his own property in a free and unfettered way, but also may freely sell property which does not belong to him but to me . . . property which he has not bought and I have not sold. [Twain is referring to the suit which he lost against the publishing firm of Estes and Lauriat, over their sale

Aided, no doubt, by this wide publicity, the work sold well. When it was placed in canvassers' hands for delivery (February, 1885), orders had already been secured for forty thousand copies, and the demand increased rapidly.[20] "*Huck Finn* was having a wide success. Webster handled it skillfully, and its sales were large. . . ."[21]

III

Huckleberry Finn received at the time practically no critical attention in America. It was reviewed in the *Century,*[22] and apparently only there. I could find no reviews of it in any other available American magazine,[23] or in any of three newspapers which I investigated —the *New York Tribune,* the *Boston Transcript,* or the *Chicago Tribune.* Some probable reasons for this neglect have already been mentioned. Portions had been printed in the *Century;* extracts had appeared in newspapers; Twain had read from the book on tour. All this might have tended to make the material too familiar to call for much comment when the book itself appeared. The work, in addition, was published by subscription—a type of publication disliked by newspapers because it meant that the volume would take no advertising space.[24] This possibly explains the lack

of *Huckleberry Finn*]. Under this ruling I am now advertising that the Judge's homestead is for sale, and if I make as good a sum out of it as I expect, I shall go on and sell the rest of his property. In the next place, a committee of the public library of your town have condemned and excommunicated my last book—and doubled its sale . . . and finally, the Free-Trade Club of Concord comes forward and adds to the splendid burden of obligations already conferred upon me by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts an honorary membership, which is worth more than all the rest at this juncture, since it endorses me as worthy to associate with certain gentlemen whom even the moral icebergs of the Concord Library Committee are bound to respect. May the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts endure forever, is the heartfelt prayer of one who, long a recipient of her mere general good-will, is proud to realize that he is at last become her pet" (*Critic,* VI, 180, April 11, 1885). (The letter was printed in part by the *Boston Transcript,* April 4, 1885, p. 7.)

[20] Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography,* II, 793.

[21] Paine, *Mark Twain's Letters,* II, 452.

[22] *Century,* XXX, 171-172 (May, 1885). The review was by T. S. Perry, author, scholar, and educator.

[23] Among the magazines consulted were the *Atlantic Monthly, Century, Chautauquan, Critic, Dial, Harper's Monthly, Independent, Lippincott's, Literary World, Nation,* and *North American Review.*

[24] The attitude of the press is shown by this comment in 1882 of the *Denver Tribune:* "An advance notice of Mark Twain's new book [*Life on the Mississippi*] has been sent to this office, accompanied by a request to publish. Mr. Twain is reputed to be a gentleman of abundant means; by a life of penury and stinginess he has managed to get richer than most people in his line of business; and if he wants newspaper puffing, he should pay for it, just as other business men do" (quoted by the *Chicago Tribune,* July 16, 1882, p. 5). When *The Stolen White Elephant* was published through the regular trade, the *Chicago*

of newspaper criticisms. Perhaps another reason was the controversial nature of the work. Assailed by libraries, dismissed as trash by influential New England magazines and newspapers, the book undoubtedly was eyed askance by critics. It was easy to review something like *The Prince and the Pauper,* which conformed to all the conventional standards, but *Huckleberry Finn* was perplexingly different. Its freedom and range set it apart from other literature of the day. Critics, confronted by its newness, turned away to review books that fitted better into the traditional mold. It is astonishing to read the extensive reviews given now forgotten books, while *Huckleberry Finn* was ignored.

The *Century* review, as has been said, was the only formal criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* located for this study. For this reason its judgment is worth considering. With the exception of some minor strictures, it was highly commendatory, and because of this, as well as its solitary nature, the review is unique. Perry praised the humor for "lend[ing] vividness to every page."[25] He commended the book's descriptive powers. It comprised, he found, "a vivid picture of Western life of forty or fifty years ago."[26] Similarly, he had good things to say for the characterization. Huckleberry was "its immortal hero," and "inimitable" was the "reflection of the whole varied series of adventure in the mind of the young scapegrace of a hero. His undying fertility of invention, his courage, his manliness in every trial, are an incarnation of the better side of the ruffianism that is one result of the independence of Americans. . . ."[27] In discussing the structure of *Huckleberry Finn,* the critic compared the book with its predecessor, *Tom Sawyer:*

> This later book, "Huckleberry Finn," has the great advantage of being written in autobiographical form. This secures a unity in the narration that is most valuable; every scene is given, not described. . . . While "Tom Sawyer" is scarcely more than an apparently fortuitous collection of incidents, and its thread is one that has to do with murders, this story

Tribune, discussing Twain's changed plan of publication, spoke reprovingly of his former subscription method, and reflected the widespread dislike of it: "This time he has done as other authors do, and placed his work in the hands of a respectable publisher instead of offering booksellers a premium on dishonesty in order to obtain for their shelves copies of a book 'sold only by subscription!'" (June 10, 1882, p. 9).

[25] *Century,* XXX, 171 (May, 1885).

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

has a more intelligible plot. Huckleberry . . . runs away from his worthless father, and floats down the Mississippi on a raft, in company with Jim, a runaway negro. This plot gives great opportunity for varying incidents.[28]

The commentator went on to say that "[where the] truthfulness of the narrative is lacking, and its place taken by ingenious invention, the book suffers." He spoke favorably of the artistry revealed in the narrative, and particularly praised the Grangerford-Shepherdson episode:

The total absence of morbidness in the book . . . gives it a genuine charm; and it is interesting to notice the art with which this is brought out. The best instance is perhaps to be found in the account of the feud between the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords, which is described only as it would appear to a semi-civilized boy of fourteen, without the slightest condemnation, or surprise—either of which would be bad art,—and yet nothing more vivid can be imagined. That is the way a story is best told, by telling it, and letting it go to the reader unaccompanied by signposts or directions how he shall understand it and profit by it. Life teaches its lessons by implication, not by didactic preaching; and literature is at its best when it is an imitation of life and not an excuse for instruction.[29]

The reviewer summed up the comparison of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* with these words: ". . . the reason of its [*Huckleberry Finn's*] great superiority to 'Tom Sawyer' is that it is, for the most part, a consistent whole."[30]

A few other critics sustained Perry's opinion. Thus Joel Chandler Harris, writing a letter to Twain on the latter's fiftieth birthday, commended his depiction of character: "[The book] . . . is life. Here we behold human character stripped of all tiresome details; we see people growing and living; we laugh at their humor, share their griefs. . . ";[31] and another writer remarked: "[Twain's] descriptive powers are remarkable and indeed unique . . . nobody else can do just such word-painting."[32]

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.* Another episode had previously received high praise from a prominent critic. When the "King Sollermun" chapter appeared in the Jan., 1885, number of the *Century*, Edmund C. Stedman wrote concerning it to Clemens: "To my mind it is not only the most finished and condensed thing you have done, but as dramatic and powerful an episode as I know in modern literature" (Paine, *Biography*, II, 793). [30] *Ibid.*, II, 172.

[31] Quoted by the *Critic*, VII, 253 (Nov. 28, 1885).

[32] J. C. Hanna, "American Humorists," *Clubana: A Collection of Essays Read Before the Literary and Social Club of the First Congregational Church* (Columbus, Ohio, 1885),

IV

For the most part, however, the critical reaction to the book followed the course set by the Concord Library. Clemens's species of humor was widely denounced; some critics even predicted that he was finished as a writer. One magazine thus described the situation:

Some time ago the Concord Library purchased Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" and was grieved to find that it was an "irreligious" book. The local newspapers took up the story and passed it around, each adding its embellishment, until at last it was proclaimed that Mark Twain's day as a humorist was over.[33]

Boston newspapers spoke sternly to Clemens. Said the *Advertiser:*

The burlesque of the stage and the burlesque in literature have their common root in that spirit of irreverence, which, as we are often and truly told, is the great fault in American character. In the cultivation of that spirit, Mark Twain has shown talents and industry which, now that his last effort has failed so ignominiously, we trust he will employ in some manner more creditable to himself and more beneficent to his country.[34]

The adverse criticism was based less on artistic grounds than on moral. The Concord Library Committee characterized it as "rough, coarse, and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences

p. 156. (For the inspection of this book, I am indebted to Mr. Franklin J. Meine.) The silence of W. D. Howells concerning *Huck Finn* deserves some consideration. It is true that Paine tells us Howells was greatly pleased by the proofs he had read for Mark, and in answer to the latter's fervent expressions of gratitude for the proffered proofreading had said: "If I had written half as good a book as *Huck Finn,* I shouldn't ask anything better than to read the proofs . . ." (Paine, *Mark Twain's Letters,* II, 443), and similarly, when Clemens on his tour with Cable in 1884 spoke in Boston, and gave selections from his works, Howells had written: "I thought the bits from *Huck Finn* told the best. . . . That is a mighty good book, and I should like to hear you read it all . . ." (quoted by Clara Clemens in *My Father, Mark Twain,* New York, 1931, p. 51), but beyond this there is no record of his having volunteered any opinion on the book. His silence is particularly conspicuous when one remembers how readily, and for the most part, enthusiastically, he had reviewed Clemens's other books. It is quite possible, of course, that there were perfectly innocuous reasons for his apparent neglect of the work, but on the other hand it is not unlikely that he felt he could not write honestly in favor of his friend's book, and preferred, therefore, to keep silence. A work like *The Prince and the Pauper* had elicited his warmest admiration, but *Huck Finn* was new and different; and like so many of his fellow critics, Howells conceivably was puzzled by just what to say about this latest production of Twain's. Perhaps wayward Huck was too much for even the liberal Howells's ideas of respectability.

[33] *Critic,* VI, 264 (May 30, 1885).

[34] Quoted by the *Boston Transcript,* April 4, 1885, p. 7.

not elevating. . . . It is the veriest trash."[35] The *Boston Transcript* thought the action of the committee "entirely superfluous. The book is so flat, as well as coarse, that nobody wants to read it after a taste of it in the *Century*";[36] and to these comments, the *Literary World* added: "We are glad to see that the commendation given to this sort of literature by its publication in the *Century* has received a check by this action at Concord."[37] Most of the denunciation came from New England, but there were severe comments in the West, too. The *Arkansaw Traveler* said:

> Mark Twain's latest book is condemned, American critics say, because it is vulgar and coarse. The days of vulgar humor are over in this country. There was a time when a semi-obscene joke would find admirers, but the reading public is becoming more refined. Exaggerated humor will also pass away. The humorist of the future must be chaste and truthful.[38]

The most emphatic record of disapproval is shown in the assertion of the *Springfield Republican* that Clemens and his writing were dangerous influences, morally and intellectually:

> The Concord public library deserves well of the public by their action in banning Mark Twain's new book, "Huckleberry Finn," on the ground that it is trashy and vicious. It is time that this influential pseudonym should cease to carry into homes and libraries unworthy productions. Mr. Clemens is a genuine and powerful humorist, with a bitter vein of satire on the weaknesses of humanity which is sometimes wholesome, sometimes only grotesque, but in certain of his works degenerates into a gross trifling with every fine feeling. The trouble with Mr. Clemens is that he has no reliable sense of propriety. His notorious speech at an Atlantic dinner, marshalling Longfellow and Emerson and Whittier in vulgar parodies in a Western miner's cabin, illustrates this, but not in much more relief than the "Adventures of Tom Sawyer" did, or these Huckleberry Finn stories do. . . . They are no better in tone than the dime novels which flood the blood-and-thunder reading population. Mr. Clemens has made them smarter, for he has an inexhaustible fund of "quips and cranks and wanton wiles," and his literary skill is, of course,

[35] Quoted by the *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1885, p. 5.
[36] *Boston Transcript*, March 19, 1885, p. 4.
[37] *Literary World*, XVI, 106 (March 21, 1885).
[38] *Arkansaw Traveler*, April 25, 1885, p. 1. Similarly, a superintendent of public schools in the West complained about the *Century's* publishing the *Huckleberry Finn* episodes. He called Twain's writings "hardly worth a place in the columns of the average county newspaper . . ." (Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain's America*, Boston, 1932, pp. 212-213).

superior; but their moral level is low, and their perusal can not be anything less than harmful.[39]

In these indignant comments, it is, of course, easy to identify the genteel tradition. Critics who used such words as "vulgar," "coarse," "inelegant," in condemning the book, indicated by implication the qualities they deemed necessary in literature—"refinement," "delicacy," and "elegance."

That the critical denunciation was widespread and powerful is shown by the reluctance of anyone to venture a defense. When Joel Chandler Harris offered a few words in praise of the book, he apologized—"I know that some of the professional critics will not agree with me . . ."—before saying: ". . . there is not in our fictive literature a more wholesome book than 'Huckleberry Finn. . . .' We are taught [by it] the lesson of honesty, justice, and mercy."[40]

At least one critic, however, was not afraid to defend Clemens against his detractors. This was J. C. Hanna, of Columbus, Ohio. Concerning the banning of *Huckleberry Finn* he observed:

> The authorities of a public library in a certain town in Massachusetts lately decided to exclude from their shelves "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," by Mark Twain, thereby giving the publishers of that interesting volume a free advertisement at least equal to that furnished by the reading tour of Cable and Twain. Their charge that it is flippant and irreverent must have been made after listening to a lecture on "The Whenceness of the Which," in that astonishing learned village. . . .[41]

Hanna then went on to make some comments about Clemens's writing:

> The humor of Mark Twain has delightfully entertained thousands of readers, has upset several rusty and decrepit old Juggernauts, before which people in polite society had been accustomed to prostrate themselves, has punctured and let the gas out of several hollow frauds, has laid many conventional ghosts, has ridiculed and taken the mask from much cant, hypocrisy, sham, bigotry, and artificiality, has revealed and interpreted human nature in the most honest spirit.[42]

[39] Quoted by the *Critic,* VI, 155 (March 28, 1885), from the *Springfield Republican.*

[40] Quoted by the *Critic,* VII, 253 (Nov. 28, 1885). Clemens deeply appreciated Harris's comment. He wrote the latter in Nov., 1885, and thanked him "for the good word about Huck, that abused child of mine, who has had so much mud flung at him . . ." (quoted by Edward Wagenknecht in his *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work,* New Haven, 1935, p. 66).

[41] Hanna, *op. cit.,* p. 155.

[42] *Ibid.,* p. 156.

Such expressions of approbation, however, were the exception, and it seems clear that most critics received the book unfavorably, and for reasons unconnected with its artistic aspects. Few seemed aware of the great character painting in the book, its magnificent passages of description, its vigor of style, and the appropriateness of the picaresque structure to the material. Least of all did they recognize the significant Americanism in *Huckleberry Finn,* or if they did sense this quality, it was only to revile it as coarse and vulgar. The book offended the proprieties of many critics, and they translated disapproval into wholesale condemnation.